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Season for Escapes

Chinese Swim to Hong Kong

By Lee Lescage

Washington Post Foreign Service

HONG KONG, July 26—

Each summer as the water of the South China Sea warms, thousands of young Chinese slip into the bays separating China from Hong Kong and attempt the four to eight-hour swim to this British colony.

The escapees are all young, and most carry basketball bladders or other floating supports for their long ordeal in the water.

Even before beginning to swim, the youths have had to dodge Chinese army patrols and avoid possible informers as they make their way across Kwangtung Province to the shores nearest Hong Kong. Then they enter the water at night to avoid Chinese patrol

boats and must contend with sharp rocks and oyster beds in the shallow bays.

More than 60 have drowned already this year, their bodies washed up in or near Hong Kong and found by the marine police.

Hong Kong newspapers call the refugees "freedom swimmers" and the Taiwan government hails them as evidence of massive unrest under Chairman Mao's rule in China.

The Hong Kong government attempts to avoid embarrassing China by calling them "illegal immigrants" rather than refugees, but the government accepts them and gives them identity cards, and relief organizations help to find them homes and jobs.

Last year, the government

estimates, 13,500 refugees made it to Hong Kong, most by swimming, a small number in boats and a handful by walking across the heavily patrolled land border. That was the largest number of refugees since 1962.

This year, accompanied by newspaper headlines and television accounts, the rate has increased. However, officials say the increase has been overdramatized in the local press, and the 1972 total will be only about 1,500 higher than last year's.

According to reports here, new Chinese army units have been brought to the border to increase efforts to catch would-be escapees.

Some Hong Kong business elements say the colony cannot afford to absorb the swimmers. "Refugees are one of Hong Kong's ugly realities," the Hong Kong Standard editorialized this week. "No amount of family planning will save Hong Kong if the current rate of refugee exodus continues."

Little Basis

There seems to be little basis for such dire predictions. While the Standard wrote darkly of survival, the Hong Kong census department published statistics showing that about 35,600 more persons emigrated from Hong Kong than arrived here during the last 12 months. Hong Kong also has a labor shortage, and the young swimmers are needed for unskilled and semi-skilled jobs here.

In many cases, such labor is what the Chinese youths came

to Hong Kong to escape. Most of the recent refugees are young men and women who were denied chances to pursue their education in China and sent to do manual labor on farms, part of a nationwide Chinese program designed to prevent the formation of urban, educated elites which consider themselves superior to China's peasants.

Although their personal frustrations led them to flee China, most of the refugees still speak of their love for China and are unenthusiastic about the nightclubs, miniskirts and neon signs of Hong Kong. Many profess to be loyal Communists, but argue that the Chinese leadership used them and then betrayed them during the Cultural Revolution.

Youths Dissatisfied

After being given politically important roles as Red Guards, these youths believed they were destined to play a large part in shaping China's future and then found themselves relegated to the farms.

Some, who have a good educational base, see Hong Kong as a way station to another country with greater opportunities. Under a program begun in 1970, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service aids about 200 to 250 refugees each month to emigrate to the United States.

The American government pays all travel expenses and helps with other money while the refugees establish themselves in the United States. The program exists for refugees in all parts of the world and has an annual ceiling of 10,200 immigrants.